
Defense Report

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The Department of Defense Brand of Arithmetic—A New Form of Addition and Subtraction

It is a Washington truism that two government statisticians can take the same set of numbers and produce totally divergent analyses depending on what they think their bosses want to prove. This is no more apparent than in various parts of the proposed Fiscal Year 1979 Department of Defense Budget.

We find, for example, an administration claim that the Army's strength at the end of FY'79 will be just 2,000 less than the 1978 level. In truth that number is more than 13,000 below the strength authorized by Congress for the end of FY'78 and reflects both the Army's difficulty in recruiting and an unannounced directive from the administration to shrink the size of the force on board when FY'78 comes to a close.

A similar numbers game is played in relation to the strength of the Army National Guard and the Army Reserve. Both these forces are considerably understrength and their numbers are continuing to slide in spite of the concerted efforts of their commanders to improve recruiting and retention. But the proposed FY'79 budget blithely assigns both groups an increase in strength, with accompanying verbiage indicating confidence that the down trend will reverse itself and that the addition of a slightly larger recruiting force will accomplish a turn-around.

Some things have happened behind the scenes, however, that cast doubt on the administration's true intentions. A \$5 million test of a new incentive program to encourage reenlistment in the reserves did not get underway until several months after Congress appropriated the money and now the Department of Defense has told the Army it cannot spend more than half that amount in the current fiscal year. The shortfall in National Guard strength resulted in a "saving" in the personnel account of about \$61 million that, by law, could have been reprogrammed into recruiting incentives but will simply be turned back into the general fund.

Then, as if this were not enough, the Defense Department cut the National Guard's allocation of recruiter man-days by 33,000. The reason? The department concluded that the Guard's lower strength did not justify the full amount of recruiting effort.

This sort of tortured reasoning is one of the most important reasons why the Total Army—the Active force backed up by hopefully well-prepared Guardsmen and Reserves—is in trouble. Simply assigning the reserves an increased manpower goal without concurrently supplying the tools to build an improved recruiting and retention program is self-defeating. The administration may find solace in these concocted figures but the managers of the Total Army will find little but frustration.